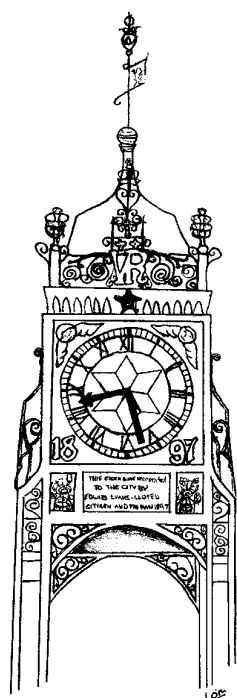


Chester chronicles

Death by dinner



EASTGATE CLOCK, CHESTER

It was bound to happen sooner or later. Well now it has happened and all the fears I previously had have been fully realised. It is not easy being up there doing an after dinner talk and realising that it isn't working. Fervently wishing you were somewhere else, but yet trying to keep the note of fear, embarrassment, and panic out of your voice are incompatible.

It had all started grand enough. I had left plenty of time to get to the venue in Leeds and indeed was even looking forward to a dip in the pool once I got to the hotel. However, the absurd complexity of the traffic "loop" system in Leeds meant that although I knew where the hotel was and could at times see it, access was just impossible. I finally ended up parking in whatever NCP I could find and set off to walk to the hotel, suit and shirt on a hanger flapping in the breeze. When the white shirt blew off and was run over by a Fiat Uno I should have suspected that this was not going to be my night! There I would be, in the midst of all these people with their Pierre Cardin and YSL motifs on their shirts and I would be sporting Dunlop radial ply on mine.

There was a message in the hotel room that the conference administrator would meet me at 7.15 pm to bring me to the venue and that she would meet me in the bar. The trouble was, we had never met before, so when I arrived down into this packed Leeds bar, I put on my best bewildered Irish after dinner speaker look and hoped that someone would approach me, but to no avail. I had no option but to introduce myself to every attractive single woman in the bar and ask them if they were Marianne. It took me five goes before I got it right, but fair play to two of them who said "Well Dr O'Mahony, I can be anything you want me to be"! An interesting bar indeed!

The venue was the Leeds Armoury which is a magnificent building, full of toys for boys. It was extraordinary how avidly all the men were bustling around, seeing all the exhibits, while the bewildered women were simply drinking cocktails and waiting for dinner. I had been

worried when I saw the dining area as there were several massive columns, screening off about eight of the twenty four tables. However, I got an extension microphone so that I could walk around with it and thus felt I could engage all of the audience most of the time. Big mistake. A politician once said, "you can impress some of the people all of the time and these are the ones you should concentrate on." I should have concentrated on the people I could see all of the time and left it up to the others to decide to move their chairs if they had thought I was entertaining enough. As it was, I moved in and out of rapport as I weaved around the space available.

The moment you realise however that it is not working and you have lost it, is a gut churning shock to the system. Recovery is not possible, you just trim whatever material you have left and finish up as soon as possible to save both yourself and the audience further embarrassment. You then pretend afterwards that everything went OK and the organisers generally collude with this—in England anyway. In Ireland you would be told "Well, that was a load of cobblers!"

On the drive home, your immediate reaction is to cancel all future arrangements but gradually the humiliation gets tempered by the exhilarating memories of previous successes and you find yourself back up there again, putting yourself through it all once more.

I have now had a few exhilarating successes since that night in Leeds but the fear has now been translated into reality and magnified into something approaching terror. Why do it at all? The simple answer is it's addictive. Whatever mind altering chemicals circulate around the system when you are up there and the audience are with you, it gives you a high. You want the high—you have to accept the odd low.

Some days you are the pigeon—some days you are the statue.

COLM O'MAHONY

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